

## INTRAORGANIZATIONAL POWER AND DEPENDENCE

### Mirror up to Intraorganizational Power and Dependence: An exploratory account



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Ali Asghar  
Senior Research Associate  
School of Business and Economics  
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan  
[ali.asghar@umt.edu.pk](mailto:ali.asghar@umt.edu.pk)

Rana Zamin Abbas  
Assistant Professor /  
Head Research Capacity Building (RCB) /  
Editor Organization Theory Review (OTR)  
School of Business and Economics  
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan  
[zamin.abbas@umt.edu.pk](mailto:zamin.abbas@umt.edu.pk)

Ambreen Zaineb  
Lecturer  
Department of Business Administration  
GC University, Faisalabad, Pakistan  
[amber\\_awan@hotmail.com](mailto:amber_awan@hotmail.com)



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### ***Introduction***

The most interesting feature of research on power in organizations is that we are blessed and plagued by variety of approaches and theories. Being blessed means that we have multitude of ideas and approaches while plagued means that many theories are fragmented and a little integration efforts have been made yet. Consequently, the clear picture of intraorganizational power relations is quite difficult to obtain. An interdisciplinary approach is needed to define links among the many aspects of power. In this theoretical synthesis, a serious attempt is made to summarize what we know and don't know about power in organizations.

### ***Roadmap***

So, here is the roadmap for this piece of writing. We begin with the definition of power followed by a short description of relevant literature review so that the reader can get a sense of what was done with reference to key concepts, findings, and contributions from exemplar research studies on this topic. In the end, we briefly incorporate the contemporary debates, central questions that remain unanswered, and new directions for future research.

### ***Literature Review and Evaluation***

In the words of Dahl (1957), power is the ability to get others to do something that they would not otherwise do. This definition has been argued by different writers with reference to its implications, for example: Does ability mean potential or actual use? Is resistance or conflict necessary for the exercise of the power? Is power relative, situational, transitive, and perceptual? Seeing from the eyes of Pfeffer (1992), power and politics are dirty words in organizational context. Emerson (1962) relies on exchange theory or a dependency framework. He viewed and defined power as the opposite of dependence. According to Salancik and Pfeffer (1977), power which is inverse of dependence, derives from the control of critical resources. To put another way, to acquire power it is imperative for one to have direct access to critical resources which are not controlled by others. Moreover, for acquiring power actors must do and focus on two things: increase others dependence on them, and decrease their dependence on others. By way of illustration one can point to the Crozier's (1964) study of maintenance workers in French tobacco plants as the classic example of power-dependence relations.

The credit of explaining the power as the first and foremost a structural phenomenon goes to Pfeffer (1981). Brass (1984) extends this thought by explaining personal attributes and strategies as critical factors in acquiring power. At the same time, he does not ignore the inhibiting force of structure which ultimately constrains the individuals. Another way of looking at this is the study of Astley and Sachdeva (1984). According to them, structural sources of power reflect from the features and properties of social system rather than the particular attributes and behaviors of any particular individual or interaction. That is to say the power germinates from the actor's position within the social system and resultantly two kinds of structural positions may result in power: formal (hierarchical) level, and informal (network) position. They brilliantly identify three structural sources of power: hierarchical authority, resource control, and network centrality. The hallmark of their study is the way of explaining the complex nature of

intraorganizational power with integrated approach and theoretical synthesis. While explaining pair-wise and three-way interactions, they successfully unfold tensions and conflicts among three sources of power, juxtaposing the complex nature of intraorganizational power.

After weighing the pros and cons of the study of Astley and Sachdeva (1984), one can argue that their approach does not provide a convincing explanation in giving the comprehensive picture of intraorganizational power. Undoubtedly their study illustrates structural approach to sources of power, but neglects the behavioral approach to sources of power as we find in the study of Kipnis and Schmidt (1988) who group influence tactics into six categories: assertiveness, ingratiation, rationality, exchange, upward appeal, and collation formation.

Ashley and Sachdeva's (1984) study does not illustrate personal approach to sources of power as we find in the study of House *et al.* (1991). They take key concepts of charisma or referent power as personal sources of power. They also found out that need for power and activity inhibition related to charisma is all related to performance.

The salient characteristics of self-confidence, aggressiveness, extroversion, articulateness, ambition, and social adeptness which are the hallmark of Allen's *et al.* (1979) study have been utterly neglected in the research of Ashley and Sachdeva (1984). Mintzberg's (1983) research microscope focus on physical stamina and level of energy as the basic and requisite characteristics of powerful people. Study of Ashley and Sachdeva (1984) also remain silent on this ground.

Another approach to power is the study of the power of groups in organizations as we see in the study of Hinings *et al.* (1974). According to him the power results from strategic contingencies of coping with uncertainty, work flow centrality, and non-substitutability. That's why top ranked subunits characterize coping with uncertainty, work flow centrality, and non-substitutability.

It would make sense to say that there is a little agreement among researchers on the most appropriate approach to the investigation of power. It appears from the literature that there are three most divergent approaches encompassing the study of power. Firstly, the structural approach focuses upon the control of resources. Secondly, the behavioral approach centers upon actor's ability to use resources, i.e. bargaining skills and power tactics. Thirdly, the personal sources of power highlight the individual characteristics such as personality or expertise, i.e. Machiavellianism (House, 1988); charisma (House *et al.*, 1991); or expert and referent power (French and Raven, 1968).

Above relevant literature review and evaluation guides our thought process to the following contemporary issues and debates, central question that remain unanswered, new and emerging directions for future research that appear promising and connections across levels of organization.

### ***Contemporary Debates***

#### **Potential power vs. power use**

Contemporary debate has centered on the relative significance of controlling the critical resources and their exchange in a crafty manner. This control of critical resources only gives us a partial view of potential power and does not talk about its use. Seeing from the eyes of Mintzberg (1983) the actors must be well-equipped with "will and skill" for the maximum use of potential

power. It is hard to disagree with Mintzberg because those actors who unwisely dissipate their energies and resources can never become powerful.

Others also argued that potential power and power use are inseparable companions and cannot be realistically separate (Mintzberg, 1983; McCall, 1979). They are chip of the same coin, as Emerson (1972) notes, “to have a power advantage is to use it”. Whereas, Dahl (1957) argues that unused potential is not power.

### **Hierarchy vs. informal sources of power**

The insights gained from Milgram (1965) experiments show that obedience to authority is very common and widespread in organizations. Hierarchical ranking is the most legitimate symbol of power in organization. But there is a very little research about the relative effects of hierarchy versus informal sources of power. Combination of hierarchical and informal sources of power can be particularly effective.

### ***Central questions that remain unanswered***

The truth of the matter is that most of the theoretical and empirical research on intraorganizational power investigates power from dyadic perspective. Multi-actor situations are the neglected areas yet. In fact, very little research has been done regarding the effects of multiple actors in multiple situations. Moreover, there is a scant research integrating the multiple approaches to power. For example, the research regarding the combination of will, skill, and resources is limited. Likewise, the research regarding the combination of structure, personality, and behavior with reference to power is also very limited. We still know a very little about the dynamics of power. Undoubtedly much has been written about acquiring power but less is known about losing power. “How do groups / individuals in organization lose power over time?” can be the future research question.

Frog-pound effects (Firebaugh, 1980) present very interesting twist to the study of power at different level of analysis. Now we can extend our study to organizational and inter-organizational level. Personally speaking, the full understanding of power in organization requires that we cross level of analysis.

### ***Conclusion***

We have demonstrated the kaleidoscopic variety of research on power in organizations which illuminates the conditions of being blessed and plagued. Most of the research work is fragmented and lacks integration which is the sign of being plagued. At the same time frequent research on structural basis of power shows its blessed face. Integrated approach (combining three approaches discussed above) as well as research on power over time that crosses levels of analysis is extremely rare and seems imperative. Power is a multidimensional construct and complex phenomena and it requires a complexity of approaches for full understanding of its role in the functioning of organizations. There is a need for further investigation because it provides many opportunities for future research.

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